SAMUEL BARBER'S CONTRIBUTION TO TWENTIETH-CENTURY VIOLONCELLO LITERATURE

A CREATIVE PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF MUSIC

BY

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Samuel Barber (1910-1981) was a twentieth-century American composer who wrote in a number of genres and for a number of ensembles including opera, ballet, orchestra, concert band, chamber music, concertos, solo organ, solo piano, choral ensemble, and vocal songs. Samuel Osborne Barber II—named after his paternal grandfather—was born in West Chester, Pennsylvania, in 1910 to Daisy and Roy Barber. Barber was the oldest of two children, his sister—being three years his younger. Coming from a household that appreciated music and the arts, both Samuel Barber and his sister, Sara, were given music lessons from a young age. In addition to being a general practitioner, Samuel Barber's father was the chair of the West Chester School Board for twenty-five years and created a rule that stated any student who studied music composition could take Fridays off of school in order to attend Philadelphia Orchestra concerts, Philadelphia being just thirty miles away.[1] Samuel Barber's mother, Daisy, could play the piano and had Sara and Samuel take lessons.

Although piano became his primary instrument, Barber began his musical studies taking cello lessons because of his mother's aversion to "amateur male pianists."[2] Barber's musical upbringing was also influenced heavily by his family's Irish housekeeper named Annie Sullivan Brosius. Brosius introduced Barber to Irish folk songs and played dances and jigs on the accordion. Brosius helped provide the libretto to Barber's first act of the unfinished opera *The Rose Tree*, a piece Barber wrote at the age of ten.[3] In 1924, the fourteen-year-old Barber was the second person to enter the doors of the newly founded Curtis Institute of Music.[4] At Curtis,

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[1] Peter Dickinson, ed., *Samuel Barber Remembered: A Centenary Tribute* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2010), 4.
[2] Barbara B. Heyman, *Samuel Barber: The Composer and His Music* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 11.
[3] Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered,* 6.
[4] Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 33.

Barber studied piano with George Boyle and Isabelle Bengerova, voice with Emilio de Gogorza, and composition and music theory with Rosario Scalero.[5] It was during the time under the tutelage of Scalero that Barber began the outlines for his Sonata for Violoncello and Piano, Op. 6 in 1932.

During the summer of 1932, Barber traveled to Europe with Scalero and Gian Carlo Menotti, a fellow student from Curtis. While there, Barber completed the first movement of the sonata and began sketching out the scherzo section of the second movement.[6] Barber returned to school in the fall and finished writing the sonata with the help of cellist Orlando Cole. Cole helped Barber familiarize himself with the idioms and virtuosic capabilities of the cello, and this partnership of collaboration was a pattern that Barber repeated throughout the rest of his career.[7] Published in 1936, the Cello Sonata is one of the first notable American cello sonatas written by an American composer. The Cello Sonata has also become an important part of the repertoire in turn from its idiomatic attributes. Barber was able to make this sonata exceptionally idiomatic from his extensive collaboration with cellist, Orlando Cole.

The Cello Sonata has three movements marked *Allegro ma non troppo*, *Adagio*, and *Allegro appassionato*, making it very similar to lyrical, Romantic sonatas written in the Romantic era by composers like Johannes Brahms and Sergei Rachmaninoff.[8] Barber was directly influenced by Brahms' two sonatas for cello, studying them in his European trip during the summer of 1932. Barber was also familiar with Brahms' piano works. This knowledge of Brahms' compositions influenced Barber's balance of key relations and rhythms in the *Allegro*

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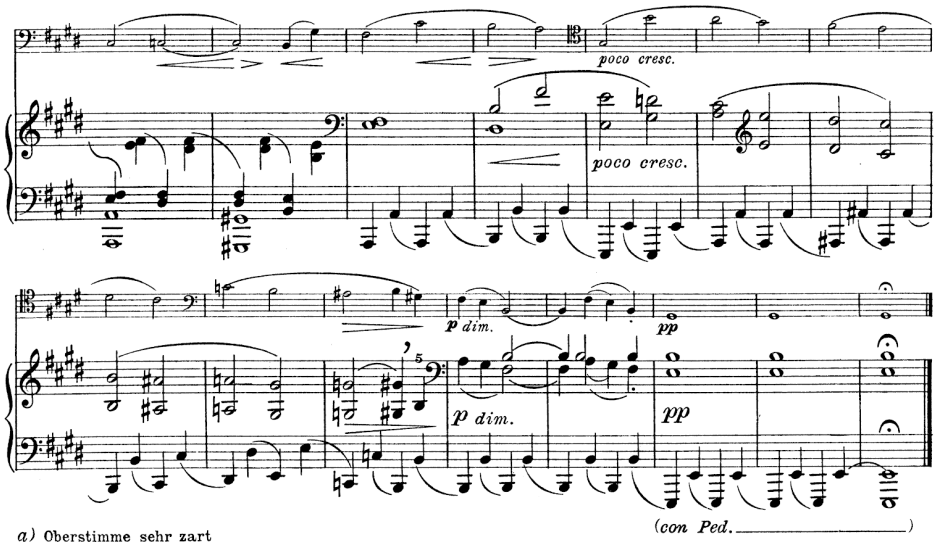
[5] Ibid., 34.
[6] Ibid., 110-111.
[7] Ibid., 110.
[8] Robin Stowell, *The Cambridge Companion to the Cello* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 130.

appassionato third movement of Cello Sonata.[9] Although heavily influenced by Romantic composers, Barber made the Cello Sonata applicable to the twentieth century with the use of dynamic writing for the piano, striking non-standard rhythmic figurations, and key relations.

The first movement, *Allegro ma non troppo*, is in standard sonata form with an exposition (mm. 1—66), development (mm. 67—120), and recapitulation (mm. 121—155). The first theme (mm. 1—28) of the exposition is in C minor (i) and the second theme (mm. 44—59) is in A-flat major (III). The Cello Sonata illustrates Brahms' influence on Barber's compositional style during the recapitulation where the music modulates to C major (I) in m. 121. As seen in Figure 1, Johannes Brahms ends the first movement of the *Sonata for Piano and Violoncello in E minor*, Op. 38, in the parallel tonic area, E Major. Barber's study of Brahms' Cello Sonata in E minor might have contributed to the major-key recapitulation section at the end of the first movement, as seen in Figure 2. Although not a significant compositional choice, an homage to Brahms' cello sonatas could be seen in Barber's decision to end in the parallel major key in the end of the first movement.



[9] Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 111.

Figure 1. Johannes Brahms, *Sonata for Violoncello and Piano*, Op. 38 (Berlin: Schott, 1922), mm. 267-281.

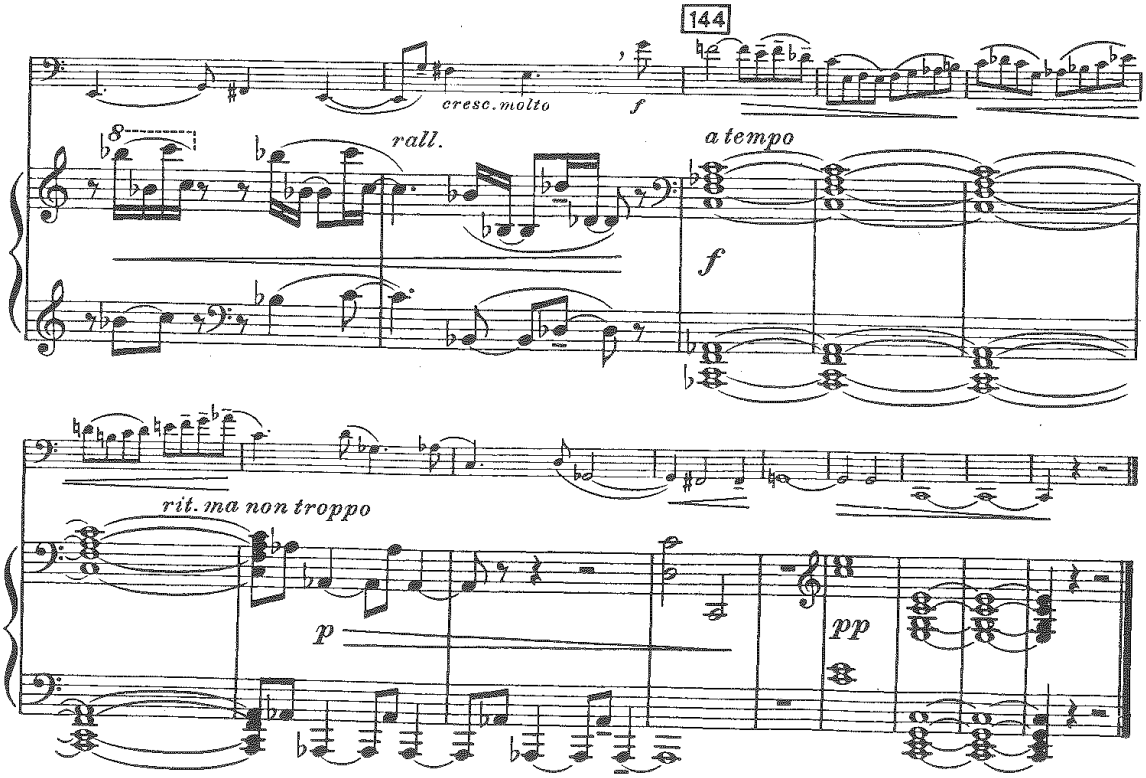


Figure 2. Samuel Barber, *Sonata for Violoncello and Piano*, Op. 6 (Milwaukee: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1936), movement 1, mm. 142—155.

Barber would write three to four pages of the Cello Sonata and would sit down with Orlando Cole, a fellow classmate at Curtis, to try it out.[10] This collaboration of constant feedback helped the Cello Sonata become an accessible work that, while being technically challenging, is still feasible for most university level semi-professional cellists. Cole's collaboration also helped blend Barber's compositional ideas with practical musical notation that conveyed Barber's message more clearly to the performer. Overall, Cole helped Barber mainly with notational issues and did not have to give many technical suggestions. Cole stated that there were not any

[10] Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered,* 174.

parts of the Cello Sonata that were not playable or did not sound good throughout their collaboration process. Cole believed the success of the composition was in part from Barber's cello lessons as a child.[11] However, Cole was able to suggest a notational change in the second movement of the sonata.

In the second movement, Barber initially wanted the middle, *Presto* section to be written in 12/4 time. Cole suggested to Barber it was difficult to know where the beat was in twelve equal quarter notes per bar, so he suggested the meter to be changed to the more standard 12/8 time.[12] As seen in Figure 3 and Figure 4, the change from Barber's manuscript to final publication is subtle. As Cole suggested, the change from 12/4 to 12/8 time is a more traditional notation and is easier to count at the quicker tempo that Barber demands.

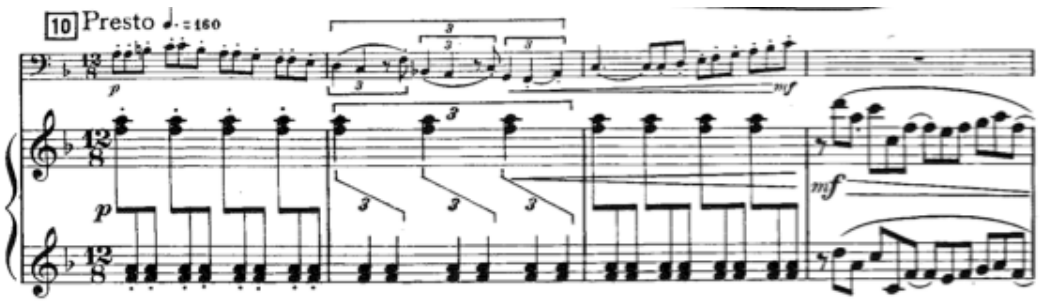


Figure 3. Samuel Barber, *Sonata for Violoncello and Piano*, Op. 6 (Milwaukee: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1936), movement 2, mm. 10—13.

[11] Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered*, 175.
[12] Ibid., 175.

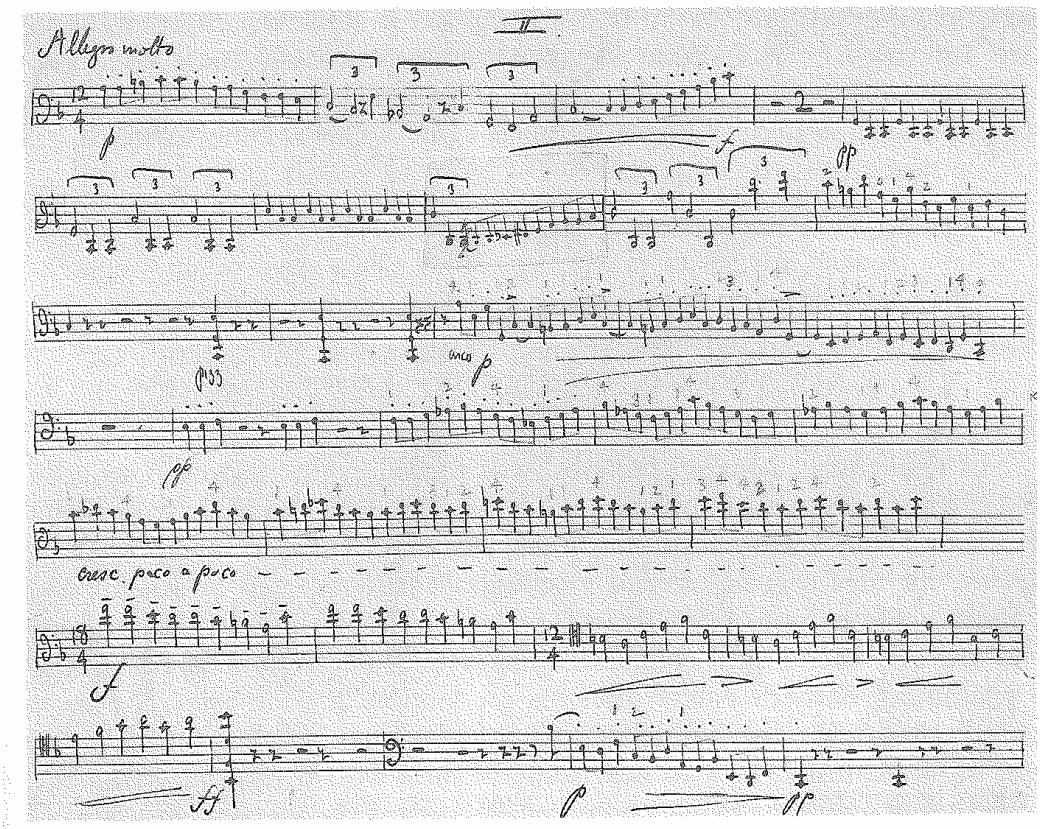


Figure 4. Samuel Barber, *Sonata for Violoncello and Piano*, Op. 6 (Milwaukee: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1936), Movement 2 Manuscript.[13]

The second movement of the Cello Sonata is a great example of Barber's developing style and use of blending his own personal, modern thoughts and classical forms.[14] As noted previously, Barber was heavily influenced by Johannes Brahms' two cello sonatas when composing the Cello Sonata. In Brahms' *Sonata for Violoncello and Piano No. 1*, Op. 38, the second movement is in a minuet and trio form. In this Classical form used in the Romantic era, the cellist performs a minuet section, a contrasting trio section, then returns to the top of the movement to perform the minuet one last time without repeats. Barber plays with this idea,

[13] Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 117.
[14] Otto Karolyi, *Modern American Music: From Charles Ives to the Minimalists* (London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), 43.

blending together the minuet and trio form with the traditional tempo of a symphony's second movement, adagio. The *Adagio* tempo acts as the "minuet" in the minuet and trio form while the *Presto*, mm. 10—47, acts as the contrasting "trio" section.

As seen in Figure 5, the *Presto* section in the second movement is a twentieth-century touch to an older form. Barber connects the two opposite ideas by writing the *Presto* four times as fast as the *Adagio* opening, quarter note equals 160. Other than drastic tempo changes, Barber's *Adagio* theme is very traditional and Romantic. The simple melodic cello line is complimented by an accompanimental chord progression in the piano line. The opening *Adagio*, mm. 1—9, illustrates Barber's implications of a vocal quality in the cello line with shorter phrase lengths of three to four measures, pauses in the melodic line, and stepwise motion with only occasional leaps.[15]

[15] Melvin Berger, *Guide to Sonatas: Music for One or Two Instruments* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1991), 12.

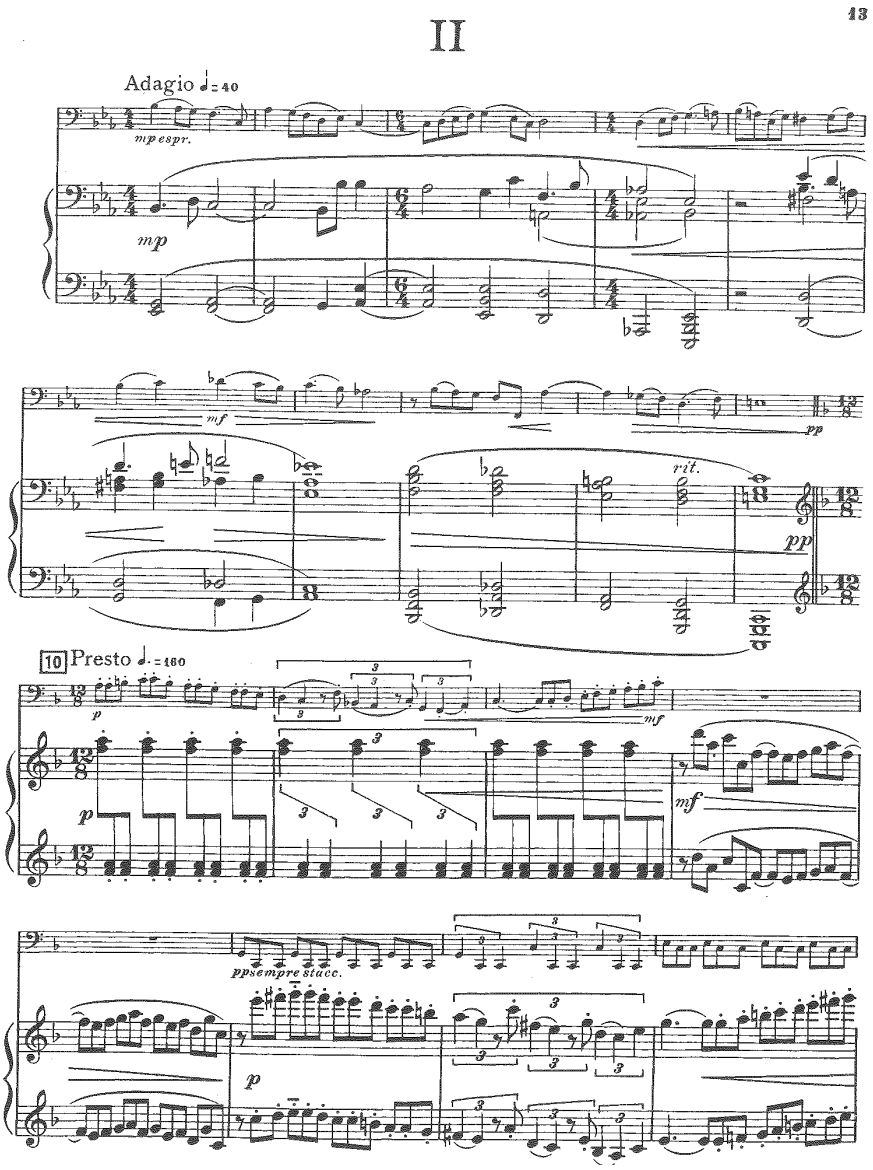


Figure 5. Samuel Barber, *Sonata for Violoncello and Piano*, Op. 6 (Milwaukee: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1936), movement 2, mm. 1—17.

The third movement of the Cello Sonata, *Allegro appassionato*, is another example of Barber's blend of Romantic and twentieth-century ideals. Throughout the movement, Barber's cello lines are reminiscent of Romantic cello sonatas by Brahms. Usually, Romantic Era final movements of a sonata are in major keys, leading to a joyful conclusion.[16] However, Barber

[16] Berger, *Guide to Sonatas,* 13.

keeps the serious tone presented in the beginning of the third movement and stays in C minor in the final bars, mm. 161—167.

The third movement also shows the beginnings of Barber's later style. As seen in later works, like the Concerto for Violoncello and Orchestra in A minor, Op. 22, the third movement portrays many different emotions in a quick, segmented manner. Barber cuts from these different sections with little or no transitional material, creating a movement with multiple snapshots of ideas previously presented.

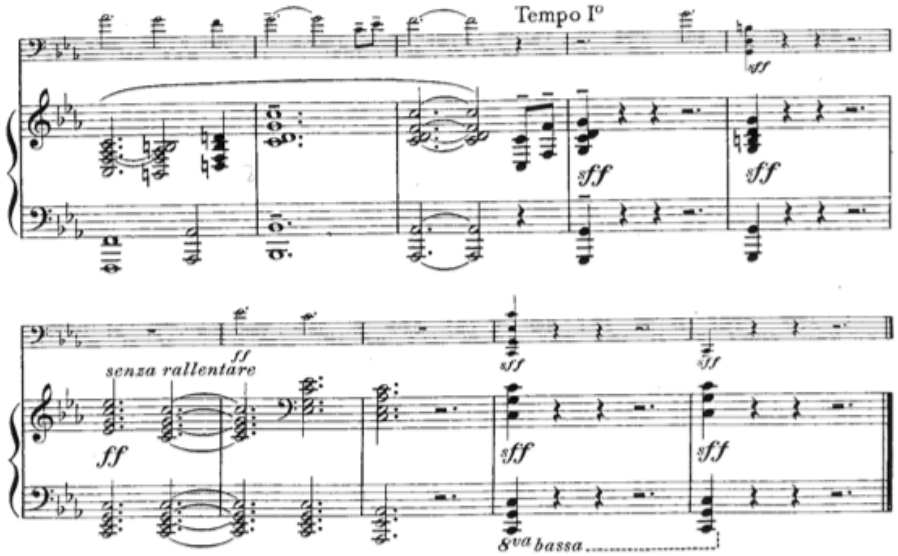


Figure 6. Samuel Barber, *Sonata for Violoncello and Piano*, Op. 6 (Milwaukee: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1936), movement 3, mm. 158—167.

Samuel Barber's Cello Sonata had a less-than-ideal first public performance at The League of Composers in New York City in 1933. The first public performance of the Cello Sonata was given by Barber on piano and Orlando Cole, his collaborator, on cello. As stated in the *New York Times* review, music critics and the general public were unable to hear most of the piece, in part, from the League beginning the concert fifteen to twenty minutes late.[17] No

[17] H.H., "The League of Composers Heard," *New York Times*, March 6, 1933.

mention was made of the sonata's reception by critics. Although the premiere was not heard, the Cello Sonata still became one of the American cornerstone cello sonatas. The Cello Sonata has been recorded numerous times by professional cellists and has been performed in recitals around the world at the professional level.

In addition to the Cello Sonata's overall musicality and idiomatic writing, the piece is performed often because of its use at the pedagogical level. The Cello Sonata is a piece teachers can assign to students to ease them into twentieth-century cello repertoire. The style is mostly in line with more familiar Romantic cello sonatas, such as the two by Johannes Brahms and one by Sergei Rachmaninoff, while having only a few twentieth-century time signatures and ensemble balance challenges. Teachers can also use Barber's Cello Sonata as an important historical work for students. Because the Cello Sonata is the first American work of note, the piece can be programed on numerous recitals with themes of American compositions or first cello sonatas from different countries. In addition, a cellist could program the Cello Sonata alongside Barber's Concerto for Violoncello and Orchestra in A minor, Op. 22, for a recital featuring two compositions of note from the same composer.

Samuel Barber's Concerto for Violoncello and Orchestra in A minor, Op. 22 was completed in 1945, written for Russian-born, American cellist, Raya Garbousova. At this time, Samuel Barber had been drafted into the Army Air Force for WWII and wrote this concerto on commission.[18] Like Barber's collaboration with cellist, Orlando Cole, the Cello Concerto was a project on which he worked extensively with Garbousova.

One of the notable female cellists of her generation, Raya Garbousova was one of the most talented cellists in the United States of America during the 1940s. Garbousova's principal

[18] Kyle Gann, *American Music in the Twentieth Century* (London: Schirmer Books, 1997), 77.

teacher, Konstantin Mina, was a pupil of the famous Russian cellist Karl Davidoff. Additionally, Garbousova studied with the German cellists and pedagogues Hugo Becker, Julius Klengel, and Pablo Casals. Garbousova's recital debut in Berlin billed her as a 'colossal talent,' and she held a position in the Boston Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Serge Koussevitzky.[19] Samuel Barber's collaboration with Garbousova shaped many aspects of the Cello Concerto instead of the more passive collaborative process with Orlando Cole at Curtis.

In their initial meeting, Barber had Garbousova play through much of her repertoire in order to demonstrate the potential of the instrument in addition to her particular technical strengths.[20] Garbousova was known to favor the higher registers of the instrument, and as seen in Figure 7, the cadenza show off those ideals in the first movement of the Cello Concerto. Raya Garbousova also suggested alternatives to passages to allow for more idiomatic technique and better articulations. Additionally, Garbousova was responsible for working out most of the bowings and fingerings still used in the most recent published edition.[21]

[19] Stowell, *Companion to the Cello*, 90.
[20] Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 249.
[21] Ibid.

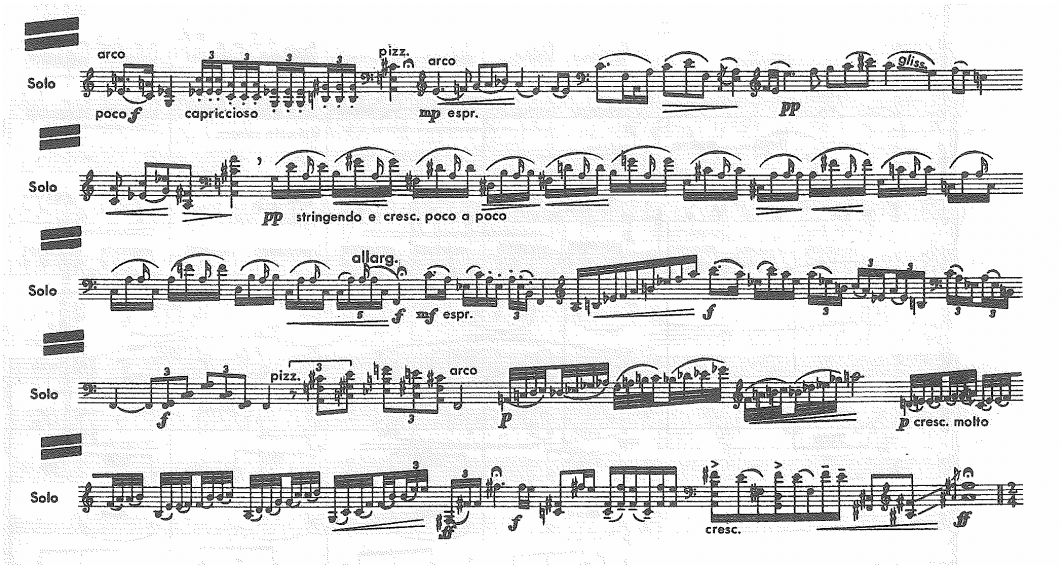


Figure 7. Samuel Barber, *Concerto for Violoncello and Orchestra in A minor*, Op. 22 (Milwaukee: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1986), movement 1, cadenza excerpt.

Because of the extensive collaboration and preferences to Raya Garbousova's unique technique, the Cello Concerto is considered by many cellists to be one of the most technically demanding cello concertos written in the twentieth century. In addition to the extensive use of the high register of the instrument, the Cello Concerto also features passages of challenging thirds, heavy chromaticism and dissonance, and complex rhythmic motives throughout.

In cello concertos from the Romantic Era and previous eras, composers tended to write double-stop passages in sixths rather than thirds. A more idiomatic interval on the instrument, passages in sixths lay easier on the left hand and allow for quicker runs than double stops in thirds. As seen in Figure 8, Barber challenges that established writing style and instead has rapid runs of thirds throughout the first movement of the concerto. These passages of thirds continue to be controversial in the cello community. Orlando Cole once contacted Barber and asked for the passages of thirds to be changed to more idiomatic sixths so that his students could attempt the

concerto. Unfortunately, Barber never got around to the suggestions because of the onset of cancer.[22]

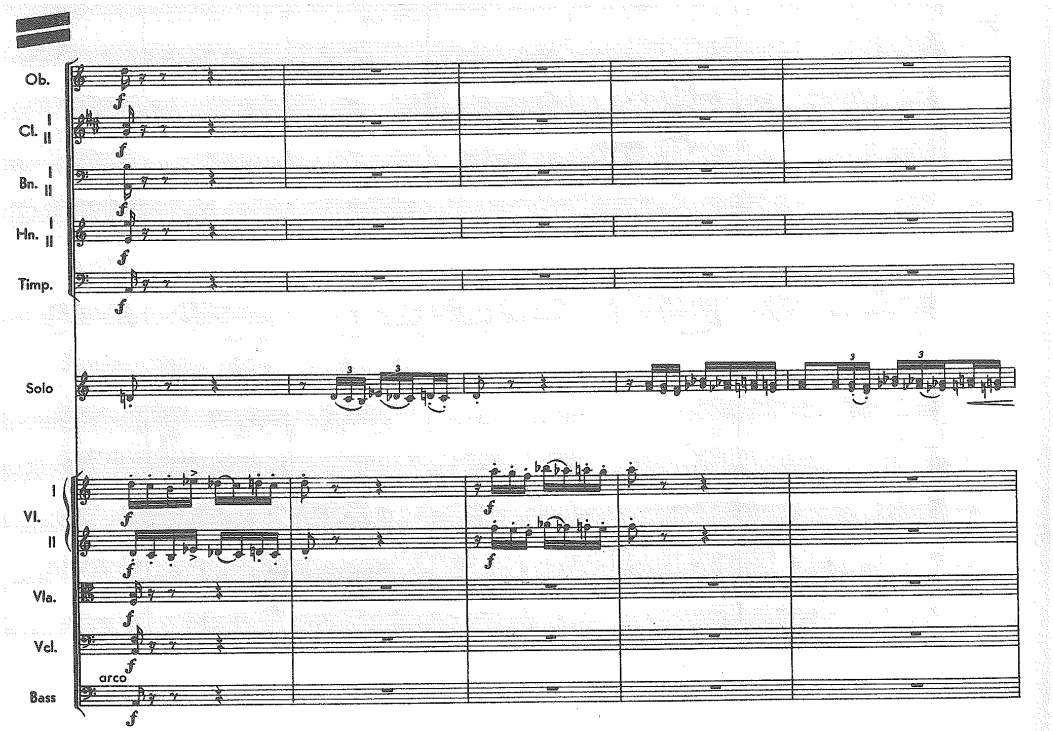


Figure 8. Samuel Barber, *Concerto for Violoncello and Orchestra in A minor*, Op. 22 (Milwaukee: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1986), movement 1 excerpt.

Although the Cello Concerto remains a technically challenging work, Barber shows some of his early song writing technique within the second movement. In some of Barber's early vocal compositions, text is set to diatonic, sing-sing passages that sway like a rocking chair.[23] As seen in Figure 9, the opening cello melody in the second movement of the Cello Concerto sways gently with the dotted-eighth-note figure over a simple orchestral accompaniment. In addition to alluding to the older vocal styles of his youth, Barber simplifies the harmonic language in the second movement, using more diatonic harmonies with a slower harmonic rate to create a sense

[22] Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered*, 175.
[23] David Nicholls, *The Cambridge History of American Music*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 486.

of ease. Written during the WWII, the second movement of the Cello Concerto can be seen as Barber's remembrance of a more simplistic time without war.

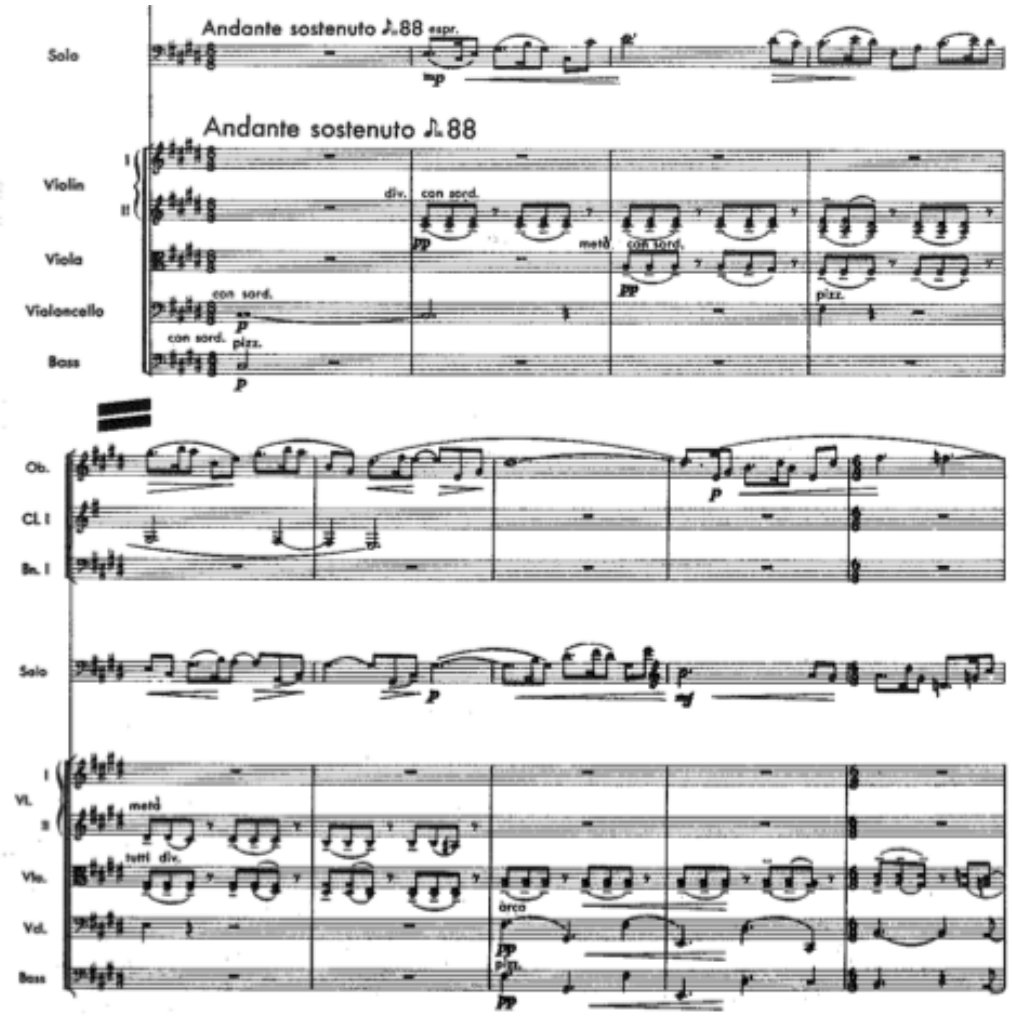


Figure 9. Samuel Barber, *Concerto for Violoncello and Orchestra in A minor*, Op. 22 (Milwaukee: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1986), movement 2, mm. 1—9.

Critical reception of the Cello Concerto was not favorable. After revisions were made in 1946, Raya Garbousova premiered the edited version of the Cello Concerto with the Boston Symphony again in 1947 under the direction of Dimitri Mitropoulos. Music critic Olin Downes of the *New York Times* stated that the new performance still confused and let down the audience

because of the segmented nature of the concerto.[24] The Cello Concerto contained wide register jumps in the solo and orchestra lines and more chromatic melodic lines that were confusing to audience members at the time. The Cello Concerto also featured jagged short themes with biting rhythms and phrases, a hallmark of later Barber compositions.[25] Even though it was considered a confusing work, the Cello Concerto follows Barber's stylistic evolution toward heavier dissonances and thicker harmonic textures.[26] The public and music critics warmed to the Cello Concerto over time. For example, music critic and journalist W. A. Anderson wrote that a recording of the concerto by Zara Nelsova and the New Symphony Orchestra had become a favorite of his in 1952.[27]

Barber's Cello Concerto still remains less widely performed than his Cello Sonata because of the technical demands required of the soloist and orchestra. Only a handful of international soloists perform the work, the most notable being Yo-Yo Ma. Even famous American cellist Leonard Rose said Barber's Cello Concerto was one of the most difficult concertos he had ever played.[28] From a pedagogical standpoint, Samuel Barber's cello concerto should only be attempted by technically proficient students who have full fluency of the entire fingerboard and bowing techniques. Teachers should give Barber's Cello Concerto to their most advanced students because of all of the complex rhythmic figures, high-register passages, non-idiomatic writing, and rapid register jumps.

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[24] Olin Downes, "Raya Garbousova Concert Soloist; Plays Barber Work for 'Cello on Philharmonic Program -- Mitropoulos Conducts," *New York Times*, December 5, 1947.
[25] Nathan Broder, "The Music of Samuel Barber," *The Musical Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1948), 326.
[26] Ibid., 327.
[27] W.R. Anderson, "Round about Radio," *The Musical Times* 93, no. 1315 (1952), 408.
[28] Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 260.

A few decades after the premiere, cello professors at institutions like the Juilliard School of Music have taught Barber's Cello Concerto, requiring it in their annual cello competition in 1988.[29] Although technically demanding, the Cello Concerto remains an important piece in the history of violoncello repertoire, being the first cello concerto of note from an American composer. This monolith of a piece showcases the musical evolution of Samuel Barber. From the conservative Romantic writings his youth, showcased by the Cello Sonata, Barber's Cello Concerto is a testament to the endless possibilities of style, color, range and emotion on the instrument. The Cello Concerto should be considered by professional cellists, teachers, and students as a significant concerto to study in order to better understand American cello compositions and the evolution of the cello concerto in the twentieth century.

Samuel Barber is a special composer in the violoncello repertoire, composing both the first cello sonata and cello concerto of note in America. Barber's Cello Sonata also bridges the gap between late-Romantic cello compositions with more modern compositions of the twentieth century. Because of his works' historical significance, pedagogical applications, and beautiful writing, Samuel Barber's Cello Sonata and Cello Concerto should remain standards in the violincello repertoire for generations to come.

[29] Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 262.

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